

DECREES OF THE FIRST PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF PHILADELPHIA

Held in the Year 1880.

I.

With radiant joy We have seen an event recently take place at the Vatican Council --- an event that ever comes to pass by design of Divine Providence, which orders all things in wisdom: to wit, the deflection of errors of the day, nascent or maturing, from the faithful fold by the provident care and vigilance of Catholic Pastors and especially of the Supreme Shepherd, in such wise that Catholic truth is presented in a brighter and clearer light. For in that Council are condemned the figments of evil-thinking innovators, who strive either to extol too highly the powers of human reason or else to disparage them too unjustly, contrary to the testimony of venerable antiquity and the ancient faith of the Church; and the command is given that the proper reverence be sacredly observed as well towards God-given human reason as towards the authority of God Himself when He enlightens and teaches us.

Indeed, a truth which was taught long ago by the Oecumenical Council of Florence has been defined at this council: namely, that there exists a Roman Pontiff, the Father and Teacher of all Christians, and that the full power of feeding, ruling and governing the Universal Church has been given him in blessed Peter. Moreover, it has been defined that the Roman Pontiff has not only the duty of superintending and directing, but also the complete and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church, not only in matters pertaining to faith and morals, but also in those pertaining to the regulation and government of the Church diffused throughout the world; and that he has not only the more important elements but the whole plenitude of this supreme power; and that this power is ordinary and immediate

as well over each and every church as over one and all of the pastors and of the faithful.

It has been defined also that, when the Roman Pontiff speaks "ex cathedra", that is, when in discharge of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians and in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines that a doctrine concerning faith or morals is to be held by the Universal Church, he is endowed, through the divine assistance promised him in Blessed Peter, with that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer wished His Church to be endowed when she defines a doctrine of faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are, consequently, of their very nature, not from the consent of the Church, irrefragable.

This doctrine of Catholic truth in which We have already proclaimed repeatedly Our belief, We now again profess.

II.

The Roman Pontiffs' Encyclical Letters which pertain in any way to the conservation of faith and conduct in their integrity are to be held in the highest esteem and received with the whole affection of heart and mind. Of these We commend to our clergy and laity the recent letters of our most Holy Father, Leo XIII on Christian Matrimony and on the observation -- or, where it has been neglected, the restoration -- of St. Thomas's Method of teaching the theological and philosophical sciences, as documents most salutary for all times and most opportune for this age.

III.

It is the office of Bishops, not only to supply their flocks with the salutary food of faith, but also to rule them in accordance with the prudence which is obtained by the light of faith. Hence, from time to time, according to the circumstances and the condition of the faithful, laws are passed to withhold these flocks from evil ways and to lead them to the paths of Christian truth; hence synods and councils are held to provide by united counsel for the needs of the Churches. Hence, too, the Bishops of this country have again promulgated in the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore the laws passed in previous Councils, and have added new ones. Pius IX, of holy memory, reviewed that Council and ordered its Constitutions and Decrees to be conscientiously observed by all those to whom they pertain. Therefore, We make it clear that in the future the form of ecclesiastical discipline prescribed by the aforesaid Council must be observed by the clergy and laity of this Province. We declare also that, besides the laws of the aforesaid Council, the Instruction is to be observed which was given on July 26th, 1878 by the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, and whose title is: The Method to be observed by the Bishops of the United States of North America in taking cognizance of, and settling, criminal and disciplinary cases of Clerics; also another declaration given by the same Sacred Congregation and concerning doubts which arise about the preceding Instruction. (NOTE: The Sacred Congregation has substituted another Instruction issued Oct. 31, 1884.)

IV.

We exhort and entreat in the Lord all Priests of this Province to read assiduously and, in so far as it will seem good to their respective Ordinaries, to observe the synodal constitutions of the church of Philadelphia, from which (church)

this whole Province has sprung. As long experience has shown, these are of paramount importance and of the greatest advantage.

V.

Since the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith has laid down a certain definite plan of action, by which all disputes between a Bishop and his clerics are to be settled, We decree that every other method of settling such controversies, as, for instance, by publishing articles on the questions in dispute either in magazines or in newspapers or in circulars, is to be condemned and reprehended; and that clerics who shall use this plan of action with scandal to the faithful and dishonor to their own state, whether they do this themselves or have others do it, are to be punished with ecclesiastical censures.

VI.

We admonish the faithful not to enter secret societies, regardless of their name, which the Holy Pontiffs have prohibited for serious reasons, and in which they bind themselves to observe secrets, either by swearing or by otherwise obligating themselves; for societies of this kind which are entered secretly give the impression of evil and danger; and the oath or promise is given rashly. We therefore warn all priests that members of secret societies proscribed by the Holy See incur major excommunication reserved to the Roman Pontiff, according to the law of the constitution "Apostolicae Sedis". In a doubt as to whether a society is to be considered forbidden, absolution can be given to a penitent only when he sincerely promises to leave the society as soon as it is condemned.* (Provincial

Council San Francisco of the year 1875).

* This decree almost in its entirety is found in the II. Plen Counc. Balt., Title XII, on Secret Societies, n. 513. On the dispositions of the II. Counc. Balt., see note in appendix.

VII.

The goods of the church are to be guarded conscientiously for the use and benefit of the faithful. Wherefore, We strictly command the rectors of churches to send to the Bishops every year, about the end of January, an annual report of all monies accruing to the mission, whether these monies be derived by way of pew-rent or through collections on Sundays or at other times, or by any other means. (Cf. III. Plen. Counc. Balt., n. 272.) At the same time We urge and enjoin every Priest to make a will so as to prevent all serious trouble and scandal after his death. (Ibid. n. 277.)

VIII.

It is to be regretted that the public schools which the civil authority has founded in this country and which are supported by the goods and taxes of all citizens, including Catholics, are nearly everywhere of such a nature that it is almost impossible for Catholic children to attend them without peril to their souls. Let it, therefore, be the care of rectors of souls to exert all their energies towards the establishment of parochial schools everywhere: and in these schools let not only the humanities be taught, but also the principles of the Catholic Faith and of good morals. (Cfr. Counc. Plen. Balt. III n. 199). Where, however, the erection of a school is impossible, let the pastor at least see that the boys and girls of his parish are duly and frequently instructed in the Catholic Doctrine, and

let him by his own watchfulness and with the aid of the parents shield them from any immediate danger of perversion of faith and morals.

IX.

According to the Holy Council of Trent (Sess. XIV on Reform., chapt. 6 "Quia vero"), clerics are to wear clothing which is becoming to their particular Order, so as by the propriety of their dress to give outward indication of their interior uprightness of character. Hence, We again decree and confirm what was laid down by the third Synod of Philadelphia, to wit, (Const. IV.) that when on the streets they should wear a coat cut somewhat after the style of a cassock, so that it comes below the knees; and furthermore that they should avoid all worldly fashions, particularly that of exposing the shirt bosom to public view. (Cf. III Plen. Counc. Balt. n. 77).

X.

Moreover, since according to the Holy Fathers, Priests have been constituted by Christ our Lord the salt of the earth, through whom the decay caused by sin is in a manner to be stayed and destroyed, (Augustine de Serm. Domini. Chap. VI :17.), we should in everything show ourselves an example of good works, in doctrine, in integrity, in gravity (Tit.II - 17); not alone, indeed, to withhold by word and example Christ's people from going perilously astray, and to wean them from the world's vanities, but also to the end that those who are hostile may be afraid, having no reason to speak unfavorably of us. (Ibid VIII). Therefore, let all in Sacred Orders who are of this Ecclesiastical Province be imbued with a profound distaste for all profane and worldly games and amusements, most especially

stage plays. And if anyone, regardless of his Order and of his dignity, should take it upon himself to attend plays of this nature in a public theatre, let him know that he can be punished with suspension at the will of his Ordinary.

XI.

The Nicene Fathers, looking to the reputation and virtue of the clergy, permitted priests to have no women to dwell with them except a mother or sister or aunt, in whom the natural bond does not permit the suspicion of heinous crime. In general, We wish to warn the priests of this province to take care to select as servants for themselves only those whose advanced age and spotless reputation remove all suspicion. The conscience of the Ordinary is burdened with the obligation of seeing that this rule is observed.

XII.

Although the practice which has obtained of procuring money for the benefit of churches from festivities which are commonly called "fairs", "picnics", "excursions", could not thus far be eliminated to the extent that We would desire, still, We strictly ordain that festivities of this kind are not to be resorted to unless the pastor of souls at the same time diligently employs all care and precaution to remove the evils and dangers which, as experience testifies, accompany these festivities. Let him diligently attend to those directions which the Council of Baltimore very wisely laid down in this matter, (2nd. Plen. Council. Balt. n. 396): We entirely disapprove of and prohibit Excursions and Picnics which are protracted into late night. (The law concerning these meetings has been somewhat changed in III. Plen. Council. Balt. n. 290).

XIII.

We admonish all Priests and especially those who have the care of souls to inveigh against and unreservedly condemn immodest dances, which are daily frequented more and more. Moreover, let them warn the faithful how greatly they who either indulge in these dances or who, by their presence at least, seem to approve them, offend not only against God but against society and the family, and finally against themselves. Especially let them teach parents how severe a judgment they incur if they expose their sons and daughters of tender age to the danger of losing the purity and candor of their souls, so that they are unwarily entangled in the snares of the devil.

XIV.

Catholics are absolutely forbidden to visit the churches of heretics in order to assist at their worship. Likewise they should entirely refrain from listening to the sermons of heretics and should never read their books which treat of religion. They indeed deserve the most severe reproof who venture to participate in heretical worship either by singing or playing the organ. We judge them to be altogether unworthy of partaking of the Sacraments of the Church.

XV.

To eliminate the abuses which have obtained in many places, We decree that by no means should gas, or oil, other than the olive oil prescribed by the Church, be used before the Blessed Sacrament in churches and chapels everywhere. Likewise do We earnestly exhort the rectors of churches and missionaries to endeavor to return to the use of wax candles. In many places the necessity of using other

materials seems to exist no longer; but if in any church circumstances are such that it seems a hardship to obtain olive oil or wax candles, let not the Priest himself presume to settle the question, but let him ask the opinion of the Ordinary and follow it.

I, JAMES FREDERICK, Archbishop of Philadelphia, define and subscribe.

I, WILLIAM, Bishop of Scranton, define and subscribe.

I, JEREMIAS FRANCIS, Bishop of Harrisburg, define and subscribe.

I, TOBIAS, Bishop of Erie, define and subscribe.

I, JOHN, Bishop of Pittsburg, and Administrator of the
See of Allegheny, define and subscribe.